

The Poetics of the Los Angeles River

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The Los Angeles River is channelized, encased in concrete, across 82 kilometers. It traverses the San Fernando Valley and all of Los Angeles, acting as an abject thruway that links diverse landscapes and neighborhoods. In recent years, the river has become a prominent case study for the greening of urban public space, posing questions about the past, present, and future of city life. My dissertation project, “The Poetics of the Los Angeles River,” addresses the cultural history of the river, emphasizing artworks—from murals and graffiti to poetry over infrastructural works—that engage its dual status as a “natural waterway” and “flood-control channel.” These projects, I argue, envision the river as a radical ecocommon erupting from and embedded within the forces of green urban development.

My first chapter looks at Chicana muralist Judy Baca’s *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* (1974–84), an epic retelling of the history of California located on the concrete walls of the Tunjunga Wash tributary. Covering half a mile, the mural challenges the dominant narrative of settlement and progress, highlighting marginalized racial, economic, and gendered histories. I argue that the mural’s siting along the LA River system brings together social critiques of the Chicana/o movement and emergent environmentalist concerns, emphasizing the entangled natural and cultural histories of the region and anticipating the priorities of the environmental-justice movement.

Next, I turn to poet Lewis MacAdams, whose nonprofit organization, Friends of the Los Angeles River, began as a piece of performance art in 1985 and developed into a major river-advocacy group. MacAdams is best known as a progenitor of the LA River restoration movement, but his origins are in poetry in New York City in the 1960s, and then as a resident of the avant-garde poet’s enclave of Bolinas, California, in the 1970s. I trace his overlapping artistic and political path and consider the stakes of his nonprofit “artwork,” which is pitched between utopian and practical politics.

The third chapter focuses on Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison’s “Pasadena” series, from the 1980s, a multipart proposal to transform the Arroyo Seco tributary into an expansive public-park space. The Harrisons are early innovators of ecoart, and their work introduces an emphatically ecological approach to urban planning, considering flood control, financing, and recreation alongside narrative speculations on planetary care. This chapter addresses the affordances and limitations of the Harrisons’ ecological politics, which they envisioned across local and planetary scales.

The final chapter departs from this emphasis on large-scale, institutional work and instead looks at the robust history of graffiti along the river. I connect this often maligned, semi-anonymous cultural practice to the reputation of the river as a toxic, forgotten space. I look at early riverside writings, such as “hobo graffiti” dated from 1913, as well as more recent examples of graffiti and street art. I then examine *The Ulysses Guide to the L.A. River*, a 2009 book with a focus on flora and fauna for the first half and graffiti for the second.

While my project bears down on a particular river, I draw out concepts that are more broadly relevant to the environmental humanities. I see this place-based approach as a way of generating dialogue across artistic disciplines and contributing to the ongoing discussion of art’s social role in an era of environmental crisis. “The Poetics of the Los Angeles River,” ideally, offers a situated theory of art and place. At the Landhaus, I will focus on completing the dissertation and developing it into a book manuscript.